

## Fact Sheet 7: Looking after the mental health of your staff and customers

Each year an estimated 3.6 million people (aged 16 – 85) experience mental ill health. This equates to 20% or one person in every 5.

Over a lifetime, nearly half of Australian adults will experience mental illness at some point. Less than half will access treatment. The most common of these are anxiety and /or depression.

Untreated depression and anxiety costs employers around \$10.9 billion every year so having a mentally healthy workplace will improve your business performance.

Mental illnesses rate amongst the most disabling of illnesses. It impacts and disrupts a person's ability to work, to look after themselves, to carry on relationships with family and friends, work colleagues and the community. Attitudes of stigma and rejection, avoidance and inappropriate advice cause additional suffering.

**Early intervention, prevention and a supportive and informed environment assist in preventing problems from becoming more serious, and more difficult to recover from.**

### Looking out for staff

A supportive work environment with healthy staff and satisfied customers will be reflected in your productivity, reduced absenteeism and work performance.


Businesses will experience a doubled return of cost invested in initiatives that foster better mental health in the workplace (Price Waterhouse Coopers report, 2014).

### People are more likely to seek help if someone close to them suggests it and supports them.

It's important to recognise that depression is different from feeling sad or down. In the workplace, a person experiencing depression could show a range of symptoms. Some common signs might include:

- unexplained changes in behaviour and attitude
- finding it difficult to concentrate on tasks
- turning up late to work
- feeling tired and fatigued
- being unusually tearful or emotional, or becoming overwhelmed or upset easily
- getting angry easily, or frustrated with tasks or people
- avoiding work colleagues, such as sitting alone at lunchtime
- finding it difficult to meet reasonable deadlines
- finding it hard to accept constructive and well-delivered feedback
- being more vulnerable to stress and anxiety
- having difficulty managing multiple tasks or demands



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- drinking more alcohol to try to cope with other symptoms
  - taking excessive sick leave or unexplained absenteeism.
  - appearing restless, tense and on edge
  - avoiding certain workplace activities such as staff meetings
  - finding it hard to make decisions
  - referring to being constantly worried and apprehensive.

### **What can you do within the workplace**


- Foster a supportive work environment that is conducive to good mental health and wellbeing
- Encourage staff to discuss stress and seek support when experiencing mental health problems
- Foster a culture in which disclosure of mental health problems is accepted, tailor plans that help people stay at, or return to work
- Take action to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health problems
- Abide by your legal responsibilities in regards to OH&S
- Encourage and make use of Employee Assistance Programs
- Adopt a positive attitude towards those recovering from mental health problems
- Have a specific policy around return to work for employees with a mental health problem
- Ensure it is clear who is responsible for carrying out any actions or procedures, ensure employees have an up to date job description
- Consumers that are considered difficult or display irrational behaviours may be experiencing mental health problems – skilling up your staff in how to respond to these behaviours is the best way to address these issues.

### **Looking out for customers**

You probably deal with customers who have a mental illness every day, without realising it. There may be occasions, however, when someone is more severely affected by symptoms. They may seem unreasonably anxious, confused or distressed, difficult to understand, or behaving in an unusual manner. In these circumstances, it is important to know what you can do to communicate effectively in order to help them and help you do your job. The following tips will help you communicate with the person in distress:

- Give visual and verbal cues that you are listening and taking the customer's concerns seriously:
- look directly at the person
- nod
- give encouragement for the customer to continue, such as 'yes', 'uh-huh'
- provide feedback – for example, 'what I'm hearing is that...', 'do you mean...?'

Some examples of questions you might ask:

- 'It sounds like you're worried because you were asked to come into our office in person. Is that right?'
  - 'Have I got it right that you're concerned about your latest payment being held up?'
  - 'The system can be challenging to deal with, but I'll do what I can to try to make it easier for you.'
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- 'I can understand that when this keeps happening it must be very frustrating for you.'

Examples of statements you could use to limit some behaviours:

- 'I do understand what you're telling me. Now let's look at what we can do about it.'
- 'I've listened carefully to what you've said. Now I need you to listen to me too. Do you agree that's fair?'
- 'If you keep interrupting, I won't be able to help you.'

Provide a clear action –

- 'The best people to help you with this are . . .'
- 'If I give you their details, are you OK to get in touch with them yourself?'
- Check to see if the person has followed your explanation of the action – 'Do you understand what you need to do next?'

### How to assist and promote better mental health of staff and customers

- Lead the way in changing perceptions by educating staff and management
- Actively promote a culture of well-being, balancing work and life outside of work
- Encourage staff and management to discuss stress and seek support
- Involve staff in discussions and decision making around a healthy workplace

### Practical ways to assist people experiencing a mental health issue

- Increase knowledge of mental health issues – get your staff to attend a Mental Health First Aid course
  - Listen non-judgementally
  - Encourage seeking professional help, **first step is to visit a GP.**

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Campaspe Murray Welcoming Business Program is an initiative of the Community Building Program (Shire of Campaspe Rural Access) and the Socially Inclusive Communities Project (Campaspe Primary Care Partnership). These initiatives are funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services and the Victorian Government Department of Health and Human Services.

Go to [www.dss.gov.au](http://www.dss.gov.au) or [www.dhhs.vic.gov.au](http://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au) for more information.

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*The welcoming business program has been developed and endorsed by these organisations:*



Community Living  
& Respite Services Inc.